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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking has recently been hailed as the next cure-all in education, but it could be just another popularly championed yet unproven educational reform or the latest ploy of a conservative restoration in education. The stages of the conservative reform movement include the appearance of "careerism" in the early 1970s; the "literacy crisis" beginning in 1975; and the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983. Critical thinking, for the conservative, represents the fourth phase of educational restoration. Yet, critical thinking can also serve the radical position by providing students with the tools to affect changes on an imperfect society. Four "right-headed" suggestions for using critical thinking include: (1) re-endorsing the student-centered classroom; (2) employing the concepts of classical rhetoric to dispel the myths of inviolate texts and encouraging students to question; (3) engaging students in the socio- and psycho-linguistic nuances of language; and (4) helping students develop the logical abilities which will allow them to become active contributors to social and political processes. (RS)

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A Radical Approach to Teaching Critical Thinking:
The Rhetoric and Politics of the Conservative Movement

As Kenneth Burke has reminded us, all intellectual activity is a form of political activity (Lenteicchia, 113). One form of such intellectual/political activity, critical thinking, has recently been hailed as the next cure-all in education. But I have some uneasiness about blindly introducing critical thinking into my composition classes. Is it the answer? Is it just another popularly championed yet unproven educational reform? Is it the means for students to achieve startling new intellectual heights? Or is it the latest ploy of a conservative restoration in education?

In this paper, I want to explore those questions and the answers to them, looking briefly at other recent reforms, at how those reforms promote a political conservative trend, and at how critical thinking has the potential to become either another platform in the conservative campaign or an educational tool which possesses the power to change our social systems.

History of the Conservative Movement in Education

For a history of recent educational trends, I turn to Culture Wars by Ira Shor. According to Shor, the educational reforms of the last 20 years began with Richard Nixon's presidential election, the start of the conservative restoration in America.

The first stage of the reforms, which Shor terms "careerism," began in the early 1970s. This phase entailed the narrowing of higher education in order to avoid the student discontent of the 1960s. Traditionally, humanities education was considered the way to a more thoughtful, personally rewarding lifestyle, preparing students to think, to consider alternatives, and to improve the quality of life. But, according to the conservative philosophies of the early '70s, humanities-based education had prompted the student protests of the 60s.

Thus, careerism was invented to short circuit the humanities-centered curriculum. Through it, the federal government simultaneously attacked traditional learning, blamed high unemployment on it, and encouraged vocationalistic education as its remedy. Big business supported this move by announcing its intention to hire vocationally educated students, and the federal government supported the move with over a billion dollars for occupational college programs between 1972 and 1975. Enrollment figures for the period show the movement.

The second phase of conservative educational reforms came in 1975 as the "literacy crisis" which was created through intentional misinterpretation of data. For example, in 1975 Newsweek proclaimed that our "educational system is spawning a generation of semi-literates" (64) at the same time that the National Assessment of Educational Progress was reporting

improvements in 17 year olds' reading comprehension, inferential skills, and writing abilities.

Increased literacy in and of itself, might be a beneficial goal. Wrapped up in the 1975 claims, however, were "neutral" demands for attention to "standards," "quality," and "excellence," all of which were made to work against such egalitarian movements as students' rights to their own language. The trumped up literacy crisis became the basis for the back-to-basics crusade which, in turn, led to increased power for business, religious fundamentalism, and authoritarianism.

An example of this conservative agenda in the literacy crisis can be seen in the Kanawa County, West Virginia, textbook battles (Moffett). Originally, the textbook wars began when local citizens protested an innovative language arts textbook series which included non-traditional texts and emphasized non-mainstream cultures. The citizens' movement, however, was rapidly adopted by outside groups including several religious fundamentalist organizations and the John Birch Society.

Shor believes the back-to-basics movement grew into the third phase of the conservative restoration, heralded by the 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk. The third phase called for a program of "excellence" throughout education, defining "excellence" as adherence to traditional norms, increased attention to the authoritarian power of national test scores, and increased governmental power to influence curricula and teacher certification. At the center of this excellence

movement Shor sees an agenda which deemphasizes the humanities, non-white cultures, and academic freedom.

Conservative Ploy or Radical Opportunity

Given this politico-educational history, we would be prudent to ask if the newest educational reform, critical thinking, is another plank in the conservative agenda.

The politics of intellectual activity have been described by Frank Lentricchia as distinguishing between "education as a function of society" and "society as a function of education" (1). To the conservative, Lentricchia says, society is functioning nicely, and the purpose of education is to maintain or restore society's historical principals. Seen in this way, education's purpose is to train students to be productive citizens, politically and socially safe contributors to a status quo society. Education, in this scenario, tries to maintain and strengthen traditional social and political positions. In literature, for example, the conservative would work to preserve the literary canon.

For the conservatives, then, critical thinking represents the fourth phase of educational restoration. Critical thinking, in this scenario, becomes a means of educational indoctrination which works to preserve the fundamental socio-political structure of the military industrial complex. In these hands, the political action of critical thinking would be to support the current social norms; everything from racial and sexual

stratification to right-to-life movements to taxation patterns can be supported by acceptance of the proscribed critical thoughts.

The radical, on the other extreme of Lentricchia's scheme, sees a society in need of change and views education as the means to facilitating that change. In this radical view, the educational system should question the nature of society rather than blindly supporting it. The radical literature teacher, therefore, would abandon the notion of a literary canon, seeing the value of particular literatures as socially established by groups and times. (In Lentricchia's scenario, by the way, a liberal is merely a "nervous conservative," someone who likes to tinker but generally avoids significant change. A liberal would add a few minority works to the canon, but would basically support its integrity.) To the radical educator, then, critical thinking affords students the opportunity to confront social issues head on, to critically consider the arguments behind the issues, and then to choose positions to support. Critical thinking thus becomes a socially accepted way to question society's norms.

Critical Thinking as Radical Education

Obviously, critical thinking has the potential to affect education in diverse ways. It could continue the conservative educational movement to maintain society, or it could provide students with the tools to affect changes on an imperfect

society. Which way it goes, of course, will be decided by us, by the educators. Personally, I side with those who think current society could stand some change, and I think critical thought education is one of the places to get actively involved with this transformation. I want to conclude, then, with a few right-headed suggestions for using critical thinking.

First, I think, we need to re-endorse the student-centered classroom, relinquishing our positions of dominance because students need to question the world, not just accept authority. Rather than picturing ourselves as wisened elders who pour wisdom into empty headed students, we need to think of ourselves as learners, too. We must enter the classroom with open minds, searching alongside our students instead of believing we already know all the answers. In addition, the student-centered classroom must allow room for collaboration throughout the learning process. Through collaboration students will develop critical judgement while exploring topics as well as while composing or revising drafts, thus countering the individual isolation which is a major tool of the conservative restoration, sustaining as it does a me-against-the-world mentality.

Second, we need to employ the concepts of classical rhetoric to dispell the myths of inviolate texts and to encourage our students to question. Too often, I think, students believe that printed texts are perfect and unquestionable, a myth we uphold through the use of prose models which students are supposed to praise and emulate. We need to

question the rhetorical and political agendas of the writers we encounter everyday. Our students need to see texts as the linguistic and ideologic manipulations of writers intent on affecting the world.

Third, we will have to engage our students in the socio- and psycho-linguistic nuances of language. Grammar, they need to see, is descriptive, one of many ways to understand and communicate with a subculture. We all need to remember that the wholesale endorsement of Standard American English is a culturally elitist, politically separatist position.

Finally, we need to help our students develop the logical abilities which will help them become active contributors to the political and social processes. To do this, students will have to practice looking beneath the surface of our politicians pseudo-logic.

Critical thinking might be seen as a two-headed beast: one head threatens to maintain a society of inequality and waste; the other promises to show students the ways to transform society, perhaps making the world a more livable place. A student-centered classroom focusing on classical rhetoric will point the beast in the better direction.

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